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TRIP TO CALIFORNIA VIA NICARAGUA

BY J. M. STEWART.

[Read before the Los Angeles County Pioneers, Feb., 1902.]

It was on the morning of an October day in 1865, with my wife and daughter, we took passage on the steamer Santiago de Cuba, via the Nicaragua route for San Francisco. The several forts at the entrance of New York harbor present a bold and warlike appearance, as viewed from the deck of a passing steamer. In less than two hours after leaving the dock a call for tickets was made, and among the passengers was a young lady who told her story in this wise: Said she came from Massachusetts, expecting to meet a neighbor of hers, accompanied by his wife, with whom she had previously entrusted her money. But not meeting them at the hotel as she expected, had come on board the ship to look for them. Here she was, without money or friends. The officers of the ship said they would have taken her through and given her letters of recommendation to officers on the Pacific side, if they could have believed her story. Shortly after, our boat stopped to discharge the pilot, and this lady, whether worthy or otherwise, was compelled to enter the small boat with him, when they were conveyed on board a steamer which was in waiting, and taken directly back to New York.

Having now got outside the harbor, our boat glides more rapidly over the smooth surface of the water, and the distant Jersey shore, as it becomes more indistinct, with the high towers of the great city, the broad expanse of waters on either side, together with the approach of a beautiful sunset, render the scene worthy to be transferred to canvas.

Our course was a southwesterly direction, along the westerly coast of Cuba, only a few miles distant. How very different were our feelings now as to safety from what they were a year previous while traveling over these same waters, on our way to New York by the Panama route! Then our beloved country was in the throes of a mighty civil war. Privateers were supposed to be at any point on the Atlantic waters, and

the Panama steamers were known to carry large amounts of treasure (for no overland road was then completed), and it was feared these privateers might attack the steamers returning from California. At any rate, as we were leaving the Caribbean sea on the afternoon of a southern summer day, a steamer was sighted following in our track, and apparently gaining on us rapidly. Our captain gave orders for all steam to be used that could be done with safety, and it was easy to see our good ship was going at a more rapid rate than usual towards her destined port. We had nothing to do but watch the craft, whatever she might be, and speculate on what would be our fate if overtaken. The summing-up of the opinions of the many passengers was numerous and various. Soon as it became dark all the lights above the water line were turned down, the course of the ship changed to nearly a right angle, and the evening spent in utter darkness. The morning sun found us on our regular course with no other ship in sight, and we all felt relieved. Now the cruel war was over, and peace reigned throughout our borders.

Our captain had made the trip to and from Aspinwall many times, but this was his first trip to Greytown. By carefully studying his charts he took us safely into port in eight days. Here we were transferred to a small steamer, which was to take us up the San Juan river to Lake Nicaragua. We were very comfortably housed on the ocean steamer, but when you come to put 600 passengers on a boat less than one-fourth the size of the former, you can make your calculations there was not much vacant space. A portion of the way along this river, which is the outlet for the waters of Lake Nicaragua, is low and marshy, but most of it, if properly cleared, looked like good farming land.

The vegetation and scenery it would be hard to excel anywhere; and the climate is said to be very healthy. It is no more like the Isthmus of Panama than day is like night. Bananas seem to grow spontaneously all along the river, but no doubt would do much better by proper cultivation. Vines of various kinds hang from the tall trees, making an impenetrable thicket, and covered with bright flowers, with every color of the rainbow. During the day some of the passengers amused themselves and others by shooting alligators as they lay sunning themselves in the sand on the banks.

The day passed quickly, for the country was so unlike any-

thing we had ever before seen, it was very interesting. As night came on, inquiry was made about sleeping accommodations, especially for the ladies. But it was self-evident that so small a boat could not accommodate the number of passengers she was carrying, except in an upright position. So a few of us who had become acquainted while on the ocean steamer, got together amidships for a sociol hour, more or less, which finally led into story-telling, on any subject whatever; several gave their experiences of hair-breadth escapes, or told us of some love affair, whether true or false it mattered not, so long as it amused and helped to pass away the time and keep us wide awake.

The few who first gathered there, by 12 o'clock had increased to hundreds, and better order was never observed in any Quaker meeting than during the small hours of that night on the San Juan river. One of these stories I remember in particular, and as it is short I will here relate it. It was told by a middle-aged man, a doctor of medicine, who, with his wife and family, was making his first trip to California. He commenced by saying his story was of ancient origin and would be on the subject of political economy. He went on for several minutes before he got down to the real story, causing us to believe we were to hear something instructive, if not amusing, for he was known to be an educated gentleman. And this was his story:

Jack Spratt could eat no fat;
His wife could eat no lean;
Between them both they
Licked the platter clean.

Daylight found us still entertaining one another, when it was announced we were nearing the greatest rapids on the river, (the name of which I have forgotten). The company broke up to go and see how the boat could climb the rapid current. A large cable was anchored on shore and attached to the engine. In two hours' time we were in comparatively still water.

Here is where most of the locks will be required when the Nicaragua canal is built, as we all hope it soon will be. After one night and two days on the river we reached Lake Nicaragua, a beautiful sheet of water, surrounded by low rolling hills. Crossed over by daylight on a steamer which accommodated all our passengers without a murmur. Twelve miles by stage took us to San Juan del Sur on the Pacific.

This was a most interesting ride over a good mountain road, or what we in California would call foothills. The native population were numerous at certain points on the road, offering their fruits, wares and curios for sale. Passed many acres of pineapple and bananas, apparently under a good state of cultivation, in rows as straight as our orange orchards in Southern California.

On our arrival at San Juan the connecting steamer had not arrived, but next day she made her appearance, and we were soon on board. On the following day she was ready for her departure north. As is known to many of you, we are in plain view of the coast most of the way up; only at one point are we out of sight of land—while crossing the Gulf of California.

When the ship's doctor was making his daily rounds on the fourth day, he found a very sick man in the steerage, whose disease he at once pronounced to be confluent smallpox. The captain's cow was at once hustled out of her comfortable berth and tied to a stanchion alongside the dining tables of the steerage passengers, and the poor unfortunate fellow placed therein. But it was the safest place for him and the other passengers, to be found on board.

Five days later sometime during the night, he died, and was buried at sea. Everything in the shape of bedding was put into the furnace, and the room thoroughly fumigated. In the morning the cow was back in her former pen, and the number of passengers was one less. Whether any one contracted the disease or not, we never knew. There was also a birth on board—a child was born, whose young life went out in a few hours, when the captain ordered it to be buried, but out of respect for the feelings of the mother, the little body was kept for two days and buried on Mexican soil.

Fourteen days on the Pacific brought us into San Francisco, making twenty-eight from New York.